

**I. Read Luke 16:18**

- A. There is perhaps no more serious matter in this world for a Christian than the consideration of marriage and divorce. In verse 18, Jesus is responding to the sinfulness of a culture that allowed men to divorce their wives easily. In our day, divorce for *slight cause* has also become common. Jesus alludes to God's higher purposes in marriage by warning those who opt for divorce of the gravity and seriousness of such a decision. The basis for His warning was the Father's view of marriage. It is as follows:

“Marriage is an exclusive relationship in which a man and a woman commit themselves to each other in covenant for life, and on the basis of this solemn vow become one flesh! (Genesis 2:24; Malachi 2:14; Matthew 19:4-6)...God's ideal for marriage is that the men and the women should complete each other (Genesis 2:23) and share in the creative work of making new people.” (*New Geneva Study Bible*)

There are two fundamental truths concerning marriage and divorce that many had forgotten in Jesus' day. This is true in our day as well. What are they? (See Genesis 2:24 and Malachi 2:16.)

**That God's ideal has always been that the two should become one flesh; hence, (1) He intends that one man should marry one woman for life (till death do us part). (2) God hates divorce.**

- B. Given the two truths expressed in Genesis 2:24 and Malachi 2:16, what sort of points/conditions should we satisfy before entering into marriage?
- 1. A Christian should only marry another believer. (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14)**
  - 2. Marriage should be approached as a permanent bond, hence with great prudence and caution.**
  - 3. Marriage is a relationship touching the whole family, church, and community to one degree or another; hence others beyond the bride and groom have a vested interest in the success of the marriage.**
  - 4. Anything that might be done before marriage to prepare the prospective bride and groom, such as pre-marital counseling, bible study, and prayerful consideration of the marriage is strongly advised.**
  - 5. Marriage requires a volitional and determined commitment that should ultimately transcend the emotional well-being of a husband and wife.**
- C. Give some practical advice to a young couple about to be married. **This answer will vary depending on experience and observations of the class. Some good answers are:**
- 1. Marry a person for what he/she is now, not for what you plan to change him/her into.**
  - 2. Be sure you are *marrying into* a family that you want to be a part of, because you will have to deal with them for the rest of your life.**
  - 3. If you want children but your prospective mate doesn't, you are headed for serious problems. This should be discussed before the engagement.**
  - 4. Discuss issues like – *will the wife work; who will be responsible for the checkbook; how you feel about credit cards and debt in general; how central will church be in your lives; who is the spiritual leader in the family and what does that mean exactly; and how will you decide where you spend holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas.***

- D. Scripture does provide us with some principles regarding divorce. Before identifying them, read the following “Note” from a *Study Paper* presented at the 20<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PCA.

**Note: Alternative Views of Divorce and Remarriage\***

1. **No divorce, no remarriage:** Some believers argue that there are no legitimate divorces at all, and only death dissolves the marriage bond. For these folks, the exception clause in Matthew 19:3-8 is characteristically interpreted in one of two ways.

**View #1:** It (the exception cited above) refers to premarital unchastity during betrothal. If the betrothed proved unfaithful during that period or was discovered on the first night of marriage not to be a virgin, then the contract could be broken. (Cf. J. Dwight Pentecost, J. M. Boice).<sup>4</sup>

**View #2:** It (the exception cited above) refers to unlawful incestuous marriages, i.e., marriages within the prohibited degrees as proscribed in Leviticus 18:6-18. (Cf. Laney, C. C. Ryrie).<sup>5</sup>

Gordon Wenham holds a slight variation of this view. Jesus’ exception clause permitted divorce in the sense of separation, but marriage is a permanent relationship whether we get a divorce or not. In God’s eyes, a divorced person is still married to the former spouse. Thus, remarriage following divorce for any reason constitutes adultery. The only option for a divorced person is to be reconciled or to remain single.<sup>6</sup> Common to all these views is the assumption that remarriage after divorce is not allowed.

2. **Strictly limited grounds for divorce, and for remarriage:** Closer to the general consensus among Reformed believers is the view that the Bible neither condones nor commands divorce, but rather permits and regulates divorce due to sin. However, a person can divorce only for adultery and separation of an unbelieving spouse. In the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*: “...nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage.”(24:6)<sup>7</sup>

John Stott and John Murray are among those who insist that such permission be given only in negative and reluctant terms. According to Stott:

“Only if a person divorces his partner on the ground of marital unfaithfulness is his remarriage not adulterous. Only if the unbeliever insists on leaving is the believer ‘not bound.’”

Common to all those who hold this view is the idea that these same limited grounds would be legitimate for remarriage too.

3. **Broader ground for divorce, and for remarriage:** Still other believers hold the view that the major verses under question, Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7, should be interpreted with more latitude.
  - a. David Atkinson holds that there are sins other than fornication which may, by their gross and persistent nature, break the marriage covenant just as much as fornication, and are therefore grounds for divorce.<sup>9</sup>
  - b. Greg Bahnsen argues that porneia (fornication) in Matthew 19 involves more than sexual immorality; it should be interpreted as including any violations of the essential commitments of the marriage covenant, including

spousal abuse or the refusal to provide protection and sustenance necessary for daily living.<sup>10</sup>

- c. David Clowney believes that the New Testament writers were not intending to give us an exhaustive list of exceptions for divorce; we should view the texts on divorce as examples of breaking the marriage covenant and seek to apply the examples to particular situations such as persistent physical abuse, attempts on the life of a spouse, and so forth.<sup>11</sup>

These views differ from the liberal Protestant view of “no fault” divorce, or divorce on merely humanistic grounds such as “incompatibility.” As Clowney writes: “To seek to multiply such exceptions would be perverse, and precisely contrary to the intention of the Lord and His apostles.”<sup>12</sup>

- E. The Bible does allow divorce in *at least* two instances. Read Matthew 5:32, 19:9; 1 Corinth. 7:15 and identify them.  
**The Matthew passage cites (1) *adultery* as a legitimate ground. 1 Corinthians 7 cites (2) *desertion*.**

**Note: The Westminster Confession also reiterates the two grounds cited above: In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce: and after the divorce to marry another, as if the offending party was dead. (24.5)**

**Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage, yet, nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage. (24.6)**

- F. What should all Christians keep in mind when considering how to deal with adultery or desertion?  
**Reconciliation and forgiveness are *always* the best response when the guilty party is repentant. The seriousness of divorce is such that the consequences on all concerned will probably be more hurtful than any attempt made to restore the marriage.**
- G. In spite of God’s ideal for marriage, divorce does occur, even in Christian marriages. In those instances, what course of action should the parties follow?  
**Prayerfully and humbly seek reconciliation with offended parties. If repentance is necessary, the offending party should turn from his or her sin, seek forgiveness, and also be willing to grant forgiveness if necessary. Where mistakes have been made or wrong has been done, it must be confessed. All should purpose to devote ourselves to following God’s will as best as we are able to understand it. In the final analysis, divorce is serious, but it is not an unforgivable sin!**
- H. In an instance in which a Christian has been divorced and is now remarried, what should he/she do?  
**In this instance, the divorce must be final. It would be foolish to divorce the second party to remarry the first, even if you feel you were the cause of the first divorce. It is God’s will that you move ahead and serve God faithfully in such condition and state as you are now in (the second marriage). It is, however, important to come to terms with the sin and/or offenses which caused the failure of the first marriage. If there has been sin, it should be dealt with,**

knowing that God is willing to forgive all our sin. (See 1 John 1:9.) We live in a fallen world and almost always find ourselves in less than ideal circumstances, that is, living through failures and mistakes and watching God cause good to come of them! God's grace is big enough to cover the worst of our mistakes as well as the best of our success!

- I. Should a divorced person be regarded as a second class citizen in regard to participating in the church?

No.

Note: [Taken from a *Study Paper* presented at the 20<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PCA.]

1. Will a divorced person be allowed to participate in various activities and service opportunities in the church?

**Answer:** Divorce should never preclude opportunities to be involved in the church. As far as service opportunities are concerned, spiritual, psychological and relational maturity, as well as giftedness are the primary requisites. The Session will have to make the evaluations on a case by case basis. A person's divorce may be considered as only one part of the evaluation process. The primary consideration should be the person's reputation in the church and the local community, not his or her divorce.

2. Will there be a stigma placed upon a divorced person?

**Answer:** Stigmas are the result of individual biases. The Session should do all it can to remove any stigma. It should attempt to assimilate divorced people into its membership by involvement on Sunday morning, explaining who they are, the difficulties they have, and the need for the church to accept them openly and warmly into the fellowship.

- J. No marriage will survive long without humility and the willingness to forgive. If a husband or wife has violated his/her vows and stumbled into sin, how many times should he/she be forgiven? (See Luke 17:3-4; Matthew 18:21-22.)

**There is no particular number of times a spouse should be forgiven when true repentance is evident, and there is no limit to the instances of forgiveness. It is a matter of grace, just as our salvation is. Though the natural tendency would be to say something like "I would never forgive that" or "I would forgive it only once," such statements are simply emotional responses to a potentially painful offense. Listen to the words of the hymn, "He Giveth More Grace."**

**"When we have exhausted our store of endurance,  
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,  
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,  
Our Father's full giving is only begun.  
His love has no limit, His grace has no measure.  
His power has no boundary known unto men;  
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,  
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!"**

- K. Close this lesson with all making renewed commitments to their marriages and with prayer for the strengthening of our marriages. Each person should thank God for his/her spouse, knowing that, regardless of what problems they have had, their present mate is God's perfect mate for them!

---

\*Footnotes from “**Note: Alternative Views of Divorce and Remarriage:** (Question “D”)

<sup>4</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, Grand Rapids, 1981, pp.354-358. J.M. Boice, “The Biblical View of Divorce,” *Eternity*, Dec. 1970, pp.19-21.

<sup>5</sup> J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth: A Biblical Examination of Divorce and Remarriage*, Minneapolis, 1981, pp.71-78. C.C. Ryrie, *The Place of Women in the Church*, New York, 1958, pp.43-48. See also William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus*, Nashville, 1984, pp.154-160.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Wenham, The Biblical View of Marriage and Divorce, No.3, New Testament Teaching, *Third Way*, London, Nov.17,1977,pp.7-9.

<sup>7</sup> *The Confession of Faith*, Brevard, North Carolina, 1983, p.69. (Chapter 24.6).

<sup>8</sup> John Stott, *Involvement, Vol. 2, Social and Sexual Relationships in the Modern World*, Old Tappan, NJ, 1985, p.177, Cf. John Murray, *Divorce*, Philadelphia, 1961, pp.20-21.

<sup>9</sup> David Atkinson, *To Have and To Hold*, Grand Rapids, 1979, Chapter 5, pp.134 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Greg Bahnsen, “Theses of Divorce and Spousal Abuse,” Unpublished paper.

<sup>11</sup> David Clowney, “An argument for the conclusion that abuse could provide biblical legitimate grounds for divorce,” Unpublished paper.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.